1: Bowen C-4 (1945-1947) 1951 MK2 Maritime Arabs MK2



the owner in turn receives. Such fraud as the introduction of cultured pearls, if detected, would bring out the headman's ax, for Arab laws are severe in this respect. But as there are always people willing to make a dishonest dollar or rupee—and the Arabs are certainly no exception—it is inconceivable that cultured pearls, carefully chosen for their similarity to Gulf pearls, have not at times been smuggled into the Persian Gulf. If the Arab merchants cannot detect them, there are probably few experts who could without the aid of delicate and elaborate electrical instruments.

### *OYSTERS AND OYSTER BEDS*

Arab lore in the Gulf relates that the young shell-less oysters come to the surface when it is raining, or when the moon is full. The raindrop is the father of a good pearl and the oyster the mother, while the moon produces luster. A poor season is attributed by many to a shortage of rain. Al-Qazwini, author of *The Wonders of Creation,* gives a different version: the north wind carries a mist containing a viscid substance similar to mercury from the Caspian Sea to the Gulf; the oysters draw in this substance, a large drop forming a large pearl.[9] But every Arab has his own explanation of the phenomenon, and believes that the true scientific explanation is just fantasy.

According to O'Shea, three types of pearl oysters are found in the Persian Gulf, known to the Arabs as *mahharah, zanniyah,* and *sadaifiyah*. The *mahharah* are the commonest, growing to two or three inches in diameter, and producing 98 percent of the pearls found in the Gulf. The *sadaifiyah* is a rare find and seldom yields pearls; it grows to great size (six to eight inches in diameter) and is often collected for its mother-of-pearl. The *zanniyah* is found in the vicinity of the Ras al-Khaymah in Oman; no details of this oyster are given. In the Red Sea two varieties are commonly found: the large oyster, known as the *balbil,* and the small, known as the *sadaf*. The pearl itself is known as *lulu* to the Arabs in the Persian Gulf, irrespective of the species of oyster from which it comes, while the Persians know it as

[9] A. Rihani, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

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*mawarid*. O'Shea relates that in Oman the pearl is commonly referred to as *qumash*, which is also Arabic for "material" or "goods." [10]

Pearl-bearing oysters are found in most of the Persian Gulf waters in depths varying from just below low tide to 20 fathoms. On the Persian side of the Gulf the bottom falls off rapidly to the 50-fathom maximum in the Gulf. On the Arabian side the bottom slopes off gently so that there are extensive areas within the 20-fathom limit. Thus, there are few pearl oysters on the Persian side, although fine pearls have been reported from near Kharaq Island off Bushire, and from Lingeh, but these are exceptions. However, extensive pearl beds are found along the Arabian side, stretching almost continuously for 700 miles from near Ras al-Khaymah east of Sharjah on the Trucial coast, to Ras al-Misha'ab south of Kuwait, the best beds being between 5 and 10 fathoms. The most productive are located to the north and east of Bahrein Island; this is probably why Bahrein has been the pearl center of the Persian Gulf. However, Dr. A. E. Alexander, a leading authority on pearls who visited the banks in 1947, estimates that only 35 percent of the Gulf pearls come from around Bahrein Island; the remainder comes from the Trucial Coast and from the banks near Kuwait.

The success of any pearling season seems to be as unpredictable as the habits of the pearl oysters themselves; the oyster beds shift periodically so that their exact location is not known until the diving starts. Sometimes the pearls are plentiful and valuable, at other times they are neither. Sometimes a bank is sterile for several seasons; then the next it may yield all the highest quality pearls. None of the banks are charted; each *nakhoda* has his own knowledge of them and his own theories. Arab experts believe that the largest, most dense, and whitest pearls come from deep water, while shallow water yields only low density pearls tinted with some color. Some of the more pessimistic Arab observers claim that the Persian Gulf fisheries never yield over two first-quality necklaces in any one season.

[10] Raymond O'Shea, *Sand Kings of Oman* (London, 1947), p. 133.

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[502] One of the [e]se Submarine Springs,
228 located a few miles north of Jubail, has been marked by a spar
312 buoy by order of King Ibn Saud.

228 O'Shea states that while the divers on the Trucial Coast are
165 rarely attacked by sharks, about 30 were attacked and two killed around 1940.[27] Whitelock states that the Arabs claimed that the danger of sharks was ever present, but that their worst fear was from the saw fish, which had been known to cut divers completely in two.[28]

228 Rihani writes that what the Persian Gulf pearl diver dreads
825 most is the *dawl*. However, he apparently does not realize what
136 the *dawl* is, merely quoting Sheikh Khalifah ibn Muhammad al-Nabhani's *History of Bahrein:* "The *dawl* is a semi-fluid animal, about the size of a man's hand, round in shape, with a multitude of tendons about two feet in length, resembling a network of silk. It has no power of locomotion, but is driven by the waves and currents hither and thither. If it comes in contact with the body of man, it burns it, leaving a deep scar; and if it is lifted out of the water and left in the sun for five minutes, it dissolves." [29]

The zoologist will immediately recognize this description of the *dawl* as a jellyfish. It is in fact a small bell-shaped jellyfish with two to three foot-long tentacles. The *dawl* swims at any level and is practically invisible underwater; thus the divers cannot keep away from the stinging tentacles, which will burn the body and can put out an eye. Along the Ras Tanura peninsula, the *dawl* is most often seen near the surface shortly before flood tides.

136 There is a species of needle urchin (*Diadema*) in the Persian Gulf with spines from one or two feet long.[30] It is known that these spines will produce nasty slow-healing wounds if bumped into under water. This urchin may be the cause of some of the open sores on the divers' legs, although salt water alone could cause them, for the Persian Gulf has the highest salt content of all the ocean bodies, and constant immersion in salt water is known to produce a rash. However, as the *Diadema* is black and several

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 138.
[28] H. H. Whitelock, *op. cit.*, p. 43.
[29] A. Rihani, *op. cit.*, p. 280.
[30] *Diadema* was first reported from the Persian Gulf by this author: A. H. Clark and R. LeB. Bowen, Jr., "Echinoderms of Saudi Arabia," *American Museum Novitates*, No. 1390 (1949).

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FIG. 16—Emir Nasir of Durin with a season's crop of pearls from his pearling jalbuts.

Pearl oysters are found from low-tide level to 20 fathoms. There are pearl beds off the whole Arabian coast from Bahrein to Ras al Mish'ab, but the best banks are north and east of Bahrein Island, and the best beds between 5 and 10 fathoms. The beds are not charted; indeed, this would be useless, since they shift periodically. A bank may be sterile for several years and then suddenly produce the finest pearls of the season. The Arabs believe that the best pearls—the largest and whitest—come from deep water, though some of the more pessimistic say that the Persian Gulf never yields more than two first-class necklaces in any one season.

The pearling boats leave Bahrein, Kuweit, and the Trucial Coast of Oman for the main season en masse to drum beating and chants, but the few dhows from the Saudi Arabian ports slip out unceremoniously. The Bahrein fleet works up, the Kuweit fleet works down, and the small Saudi Arabian fleet works in the middle.

The *nakhoda* (captain) of a pearling dhow orients his craft at the edge of a bed so that when the anchor line is paid out, the dhow will drift across the bed. When the divers start to get only a few oysters, the dhow is allowed to drift a little. When it is completely across the bed, the crew moves it back to a fresh location with the sweeps, to the accompaniment of drum beating and chants. It is here that the nakhoda shows his real skill and knowledge, for he must keep his craft in virgin water.

Pearl diving in the Persian Gulf is essentially "skin diving." The diver wears only a loincloth and leather fingers to protect his fingers from sharp coral and shells; a horn noseclip and cotton or beeswax to stuff into his ears complete the "equipment." The use of drags, dredges, or compressed-air diving suits has been prohibited by the British, long the protectors of the Persian Gulf, and only the inhabitants of the Gulf—Arabs and Persians—can work the pearl fisheries.